The Earth community that's possible

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In my last column I reflected on some of the daunting challenges facing humanity and the planet today, topmost among them the climate crisis and our commission of matricide against Mother Earth.

We'll soon enter year four of what climate scientists tell us will be humanity's decisive decade. Unless we navigate a global change of course before 2030, they warn, we risk doing such irreversible damage to Earth's regenerative systems that our species is unlikely to survive.

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We deny or minimize this counsel at our peril. Yet deny and minimize it we do. It's as if we – the global community of nations, our leaders and the general citizenry – have somehow rendered ourselves incapable of rational thought and consideration.

United Nations (UN) Secretary General Antonio Guterres puts it this way: "We are gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction." The international community is not ready or willing to tackle the major challenges of our age, even though they "threaten the very future of humanity and the fate of our planet."

Author and visionary David Korten puts a finer point on this seeming planetary death wish. "Our current society cannot be considered civilized by any objective standard," he says. "We grow the fortunes of billionaires, even as we increase the numbers of homeless refugees and destroy Earth's capacity to sustain life."

Earlier this year in yes! magazine, the 84-year-old Korten reflected on a lifetime of engagement in conversations with some of the world's most extraordinary minds. In recent years, the discussions have become especially exuberant and hopeful, Korten says.

A stirring vision of a life-serving civilization, an Earth community, has emerged. It has its genesis, Korten adds, in an exciting convergence of Indigenous understanding of the world and observations at the leading edge of contemporary science.

At the core of the vision is the "foundational truth" that life is a "fundamentally cooperative enterprise."

Indeed, as science has been increasingly demonstrating, life depends on diverse and inter-connected communities of all living beings (not just humans). They self-organize to establish and maintain the conditions essential to their (and our) individual and mutual existence.

The implications of this truth, Korten adds, run deep. They call us "to transform how we structure and manage our relationships with one another and the Earth."

This living Earth is unique among all the planets we know about, precisely because of the thrumming, thriving community of life it sustains.

In turn, our well-being as humans depends on that of the Earth. By disrespecting the integrity of the planet, we are surely signing our own death warrant.
As humans we have the distinctive ability, the extraordinary power, to consciously shape the planet's future, and thereby our own. But when we make wrong choices we become, as Korten says, "an existential threat to ourselves and to the whole of the living community."

We're witness to those dangers now, in epic proportion. Dramatic surges in heat waves, storms, floods, droughts, wildfires and of course the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also wars we thought we'd seen the last of, like the war in Ukraine, with its threat of escalation into a third world war, or even going nuclear.

We're condemning ourselves to the same fate as the 150-200 species of plants, insects, birds and mammals the UN Environment Programme says become extinct every 24 hours.

We are sorely mistaken, Korten says, if we think they are short-lived problems we can put behind us just by electing new political leaders or reducing our use of plastic bags.

"We are dealing with false assumptions about what and who we are that lead to deeply flawed collective choices," he said. "We must publicly challenge those false assumptions and replace them with our deepening understanding of (the ecological way) life works."

So what would a truly civilized, life-centered civilization look like?

An ecological civilization will differ dramatically from our current world, obsessed as it is with maximizing growth in individual and corporate financial assets.

Korten and his colleagues have outlined some essential components: conflicts like that surrounding Ukraine will be resolved peacefully through diplomacy; power will be shared within and among bio-regionally self-reliant local communities, and most decisions will be made locally through radically

democratic processes; government and business will be accountable to the people they serve; everyone will share in the ownership of and responsibility to care for the physical and intellectual assets on which their means of living depend; each community will care for and seek to live within the means of its local ecosystems – most material needs will be met with local circular supply chains; farms will be small-scale, farming methods will feature regenerative soil care, diets will be mostly vegetarian; and cities will be designed to reconnect people and nature while meeting needs for personal transport with walking, cycling and public transit.

Such changes are not modest. Sacrifice will be needed, especially for those of us who currently consume beyond our share of Earth's means.

Some may chafe at the thought of being stripped of their assumed right to exploit others for personal gain. Perhaps with time, Korten thinks, they may come to cherish the restoration of their humanity.

Civilizational renewal of this order surely begins by learning to recognize the sacred in every person, including ourselves, and in every aspect of the created order – animals, plants, insects, even inanimate objects like rocks and water.

In future columns I'll reflect on how diverse people and communities in different social, political, economic and environmental contexts are investing hope, ingenuity, courage and determination to live into Earth community. Its realization is ours – if we choose it.

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